

The excellence of Thessalian horses

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Alexander the Great's legendary Macedonian cavalry depended on the finest quality horses from Thessaly, as did many ancient Greek equestrians. Emma Aston investigates their prestigious pedigree and reputation.

Alexander went quickly up to Boukephalas, took hold of his bridle, and turned him towards the sun, for he had noticed that the horse was shying at the sight of his own shadow, as it fell in front of him and constantly moved whenever he did. He ran alongside the animal for a little way, calming him down by stroking him, and then, when he saw he was full of spirit and courage, he quietly threw aside his cloak and with a light spring vaulted safely on to his back. For a little while he kept feeling the bit with the reins, without jarring or tearing his mouth, and got him collected. Finally, when he saw that the horse was free of his fears and impatient to show his speed, he gave him his head and urged him forward, using a commanding voice and a touch of the foot.

At first Philip and his friends held their breath and looked on in an agony of suspense, until they saw Alexander reach the end of his gallop, turn in full control, and ride back triumphant and exulting in his success. Thereupon the rest of the company broke into loud applause, while his father, we are told, actually wept for joy, and when Alexander had dismounted he kissed him and said, 'My boy, you must find a kingdom big enough for your ambitions. Macedonia is too small for you.' (Plutarch, Life of Alexander 6, trans. Duff.)

A horse fit for a king

The story of how the young Alexander acquired the horse Boukephalas is well known. It is one of many tales in which the prince prefigures his later greatness through some act of unequalled daring. Plutarch, who loved anecdotes which reflected the characters and virtues of his

subjects, gave a particularly detailed account of the episode: the horse was presented first to Alexander's father King Philip but proved too savage to ride even for the most experienced royal grooms; angrily, the king ordered it to be led away, at which Alexander protested loudly that a great animal was being wasted and volunteered to ride it himself. His astonishing success in doing so is described vividly in the excerpt above.

This is by no means the last we hear of Boukephalas. Acclaimed king after his father's assassination in 336 B.C., in 334 Alexander crossed the Hellespont to begin his conquest of the Persian empire, and his famous horse went with him. Boukephalas carried the king into many a great fight and safe out the other side, though as the years of conquest passed his advancing age called for special measures to preserve his strength: elsewhere Plutarch reports that Alexander used to ride another horse in the lead-up to a battle, drawing up and reviewing his formations, before switching to Boukephalas for the battle itself. When the horse eventually died, at the advanced age of thirty (note, Alexander himself only lived to thirty-three), he was accorded a privilege previously unparalleled among ancient domestic animals: a city, Boukephala, named in his honour.

The career of Boukephalas provides a fascinating window into the relationship between men and animals in antiquity. However, one particular aspect has recently been preoccupying me and one of my students, Joshua Kerr. Joshua and I are collaborating on a journal article as part of Reading's Undergraduate Research Opportunities Placement scheme, and for us what is particularly interesting about Boukephalas is where he came from: Thessaly, a region of northern Greece famous for its horses and its horsemen. The name Boukephalas in fact refers to the ox-head brand which identified Alexander's mount as a product of the Thessalian city of Pharsalos, one of

several regionally-specific horse marks known from ancient Greece, which are invaluable in detecting exports; other Thessalian examples are the *pelekus* (Axe) and the *kentauros* (Centaur), associated with the great cities of Pherai and Larisa respectively.

Thessalian thoroughbreds in battle

Our research project is investigating the reputation and the use of Thessalian horses outside Thessaly, and Boukephalas emerges as one celebrity example of a far wider trend. For a start, Alexander's use of Thessalian horses and their riders was not limited to his possession of one fine animal: like his father before him, he recognised and exploited the excellence of the Thessalian cavalry. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the Battle of Gaugamela in 331 B.C. in which Alexander's forces defeated those of the Persian King Darius despite significant numerical disadvantage. We are told that Alexander himself led from the centre; out on the left wing, under the command of the senior general Parmenion, were the Thessalian cavalry, the best being those of the city of Pharsalos, who were given the honour of fighting around Parmenion himself. During the course of the battle the Macedonian left had to face the pick of the Persian cavalry under Mazaios, and came under almost intolerable pressure, but eventually prevailed, as the historian Diodoros reports:

For a time, fighting brilliantly, [Parmenion] even seemed to have the upper hand thanks to the fighting qualities of the Thessalians, but the weight and numbers of Mazaios' command brought the Macedonian cavalry into difficulties. A great slaughter took place, and despairing of withstanding the Persian might, Parmenion sent off some of his horsemen to Alexander, begging him to come to their support quickly. They carried out their orders with dispatch, but finding that Alexander was already in full pursuit at a great distance from the battlefield they returned without accomplishing their mission.

Nevertheless Parmenion handled the Thessalian squadrons with the utmost skill and finally, killing many of the enemy, routed the Persians. (Diodoros 17.60.5–8, trans. Oldfather, adapted.)

The quality of the Thessalian cavalry is a theme which recurs elsewhere in the accounts of Alexander's great battles in the earlier stages of his conquests. It is important to note that presumably, as the campaign progressed, fewer and fewer of the Thessalian soldiers would actually have been riding horses from their homeland; we know almost nothing about the procedures for army remounts, but as Persia was well supplied with its own excellent cavalry horses it is likely that, once the resources of the empire were at Alexander's disposal, native animals would have been increasingly used to replace dead, injured, and worn-out mounts in his army. What was not reduced, however, was the skill of the Thessalian horsemen, derived from a centuries-old tradition of equestrianism and horse-breeding embedded in Thessalian society.

'A Thessalian horse, a Spartan woman, and men who drink the water of fine Arethousa [i.e. Syracusans].' This formula, attributed to an oracular utterance by the Pythia at Delphi, became a by-word in antiquity for the notion of excellence, of bestness, and the Thessalian horse leads the list. Best in what sense? In war, as Alexander found, and he was not the only one: inscriptions from the fourth and third centuries B.C. reveal substantial use of Thessalian horses in the Athenian cavalry, giving historical veracity to the literary motif. Other contexts, however, also emerge. One is racing. Chariot- and horse-races were an important feature of many athletic festivals in ancient Greece, including the so-called Crown Games (Nemean, Isthmian, Olympian, and Pythian); while human athletes showed off their strength and endurance, what the equestrian events really displayed was wealth, since the kudos of victory went not to the jockey or charioteer who risked life and limb in the hippodrome but to the owner. Owners almost never rode or drove themselves, and indeed did not always even attend the Games in person, but they did spend an enormous amount of money, breeding or buying the horses, training them and keeping them fed, and acquiring expensive and elaborate equipment. Thus entering a horse or a chariot-team at one of the great festivals was the perfect way to flash your cash in front of a massive audience of your fellow-Greeks.

A premium brand (literally)

And when it came to horses, Thessalian ones were among the priciest. The thirteen

talents paid for Boukephalos was a vast sum; to put it in perspective, a day's wage for a skilled labourer in Classical Athens was one drachma, and a talent was equivalent to six thousand drachmai. Though we do not hear of any other horses reaching such a price, references to the expensiveness of Thessalian horses abound, and as a result they had the cachet of extreme luxury. They were truly the Ferraris of the equine world, and just as expensive to maintain and to fuel. They tend to turn up, in the ancient literature, in a small cluster of top horse types designated by their brands: in addition to the Thessalian ones already mentioned, we have the *koppatias* or *koppaphoros*, which bore the *koppa* (Ϟ) of Corinth, and the *sanphoras* bearing the *san* (Doric sigma) of Sikyon in the north-east Peloponnese. Aristophanes lists ox-head and *koppatias* side by side a couple of times, and the trend continues into later Greek literature. When, for example, the brilliant satirist Lucian, writing in the second century A.D., wished to chastise someone who bought lots of books at great expense without ever reading them, he likened him to a man who could not ride but spent a fortune on a 'Persian or centaur-brand or ox-head horse' – that is, on the most costly money could buy.

For all the respect accorded to the Thessalians for their cavalry skills, their preoccupation with horses was sometimes given an uncomplimentary twist by fellow-Greeks. Plato's dialogue *Meno* is a good example of this. In it the philosopher Sokrates and the young Menon of Pharsalos debate the nature of virtue, and Sokrates opens proceedings with the following remark:

Meno, of old the Thessalians were famous and admired among the Greeks for their riding and their riches; but now they have a name, I believe, for wisdom also... (Plato, Meno 70a–b, trans. Lamb.)

This looks at first like a compliment, and no doubt Menon is conceited enough to take it as such. As the dialogue progresses, however, it becomes clear to the reader that the young man's apparent cleverness – and by extension that of his fellow-Thessalians – is a sham. The ultimate point seems to be that in fact the Thessalians should stick to horsemanship, as they are fit for little else, certainly nothing of an intellectual nature.

This accords with a general tendency, in ancient texts from the late fifth century onwards, to denigrate Thessalian intelligence or integrity, in which equine excellence often serves as a pointed contrast with human inadequacy. The Cynic philosopher Krates (c. 368–288 B.C.) ticked the Thessalians off in a letter for lavishing care on their already superb horses while neglecting their own perilous moral condition. The Hellenistic poet

Theokritos in his fourteenth *Idyll* stages a conversation between an Athenian philosopher (what else?) and a Thessalian horse-dealer (what else?) in which the latter sings an annoying song and is punched in the face. Typical Thessalian, his reader would have thought: good with horses, but not the sharpest swords in the armoury.

There may well be a bit of sour grapes at work in such criticisms, at least on the part of Athenian writers like Plato. An Athenian who won an equestrian event at the Pythian Games could – and did – put up an inscription trumpeting his victory and calling his homeland 'the horse-rearing land of Kekrops', but that really is stretching the truth: arid Attica was better for goats than for horses, and lacked the tracts of flat, well-watered land, suitable for large-scale grazing, in which Thessaly abounded. No wonder the excellence of northern horses sometimes rankled with the men of the south as they looked out over their stony farmsteads, turning their ink to bile.

It is interesting to note, however, that though Thessaly's horses could be turned to the region's disadvantage, no-one ever actually denied their quality: that, it seems, was a truth beyond the reach of even the most scathing critic.

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